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*CHIBDRAL:*  
A Traditional Bhutanese Welcome Ceremony<sup>ε</sup>

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**Introduction**

As an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, religion pervades many aspects of Bhutanese life. It is believed that when an event or celebration is well executed, it will be more effective and bring about the most benefit to all beings. The idea of ‘tendrel’, or auspiciousness, is a strong motivator for Bhutanese, as it is thought that if something—whether it be a promotion, marriage, or the like—has an auspicious beginning, it will bring forth positive results until its end. Of all ceremonial programs, *chibdral* is the performed first, and its proper execution is critical, as is the correct performance of the *marchang* and *zhugdral* ceremonies that follow. Together, the three ceremonies of *chibdral*, *marchang*, and *zhugdral* are an integral part of Bhutanese tradition, performed before any important event.

*Chibdral*, the focus of this paper, is a ceremonial procession of men and horses. ‘Chib’ refers to the horse that leads the procession and ‘Dral’ means “uniform line”. With a history believed to stretch back to the time of the Buddha, *chibdral* continues to be one of the most important and most frequently performed

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ceremonies in modern Bhutan. Performed in honour of special guests, to celebrate promotions or to formally open a programme, *chibdral* is ubiquitous within the kingdom, yet little known or understood outside of it.

### **Origins and development of *chibdral***

According to Bhutanese belief, an early form of the ceremony dates to the time of the Buddha, around the fifth century BCE. The earliest form of welcoming procession that is attested in the teachings is after the Buddha descended from the Trayastrimsa heaven. The Buddha had gone there post-Enlightenment in order to teach his mother Mahamaya. After a stay of a few months, his disciples begged him to return to earth and teach for their benefit. The Lord Buddha relented and returned to earth by descending a triple ladder. It is believed that both gods and humans celebrated this event with a grand reception of the Lord Buddha through the various forms of procession.

Bhutanese consider the second event that led to *chibdral* as a series of gift exchanges between two Indian kings. King Bimbisara of Magadha and King Udrayana of Vasta were very close friends and would often exchange gifts. Once, King Udrayana sent a priceless gift to his friend, King Bimbisara wanted to give a picture of the Buddha in exchange. But no artist could draw the Buddha, because of his splendour and the light emitting from his body. Legend believes the Buddha then advised the artists to trace his shadow. This is supposed to have been the first painted figure of the Buddha, and thus an even more special gift. Bimbisara sent this gift with a letter stating that, "I am sending you the gift which is far more precious than three realms. You should decorate your city from the distance of 15 miles and receive in parade with respect and offerings for which you will accumulate immense merits." So, King Udrayana cleaned his city and decorated with so many

banners and received with grand ceremony that included four branches of an army: 1. cavalry, 2. elephantry, 3. chariots, and 4. infantry.

Bhutanese trace the third origin of *chibdral* to the ninth century, when Chandrakirti was Abbot of Nalanda University. While he was teaching, he saw a person standing nearby in which he asked who he was. Chandrakirti thought that he could be someone who was interested in debate. However, during the course of their communication Chandrakirti realized this was Chandragomin, a great scholar from the south.

Chandrakirti immediately said that a great scholar like him cannot make an entry that way, and offered to arrange a welcome ceremony. Chandragomin responded saying it is not appropriate to be welcomed by fully ordained monks as he himself was a lay practitioner. Chandrakirti responded that if that was the case, a statue of Manjushri would be invited, and Chandragomin would fan it as part of the procession. When the sculpture arrives, the monks will welcome the statue.

### ***Chibdral* in Bhutan**

In 1616, a religious master named Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal left Tibet and came south. He was the reincarnation of the scholar Pema Karpo, and held a high position in the Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist tradition. At the invitation of his patrons in the south, he journeyed to Bhutan, which was then a series of local kingdoms. For the next three decades, the Zhabdrung would unify the western and central areas, forming the core of the Bhutanese nation and establishing governmental and religious authority through the chos srid system. The Zhabdrung is responsible for introducing and systematizing a number of prominent rituals, including *chibdral*, which encouraged loyalty to the state and

offered a chance to display its power. By showing the wealth and resources available in the system, people were reluctant to challenge it, and at the same time, they identified with the different parts—religious items, local dances—which helped them to feel a sense of unity.

### **Types of *chibdral***

In Bhutan, there are three levels of *chibdral* processions. The most extensive form is performed for the highest-ranking guests, and there are also intermediate and abbreviated levels. The most elaborate form of the ceremony includes more than forty-five individual components, with religious items carried by monks and additional, more mundane items carried by both lay people and monks.

Ideally, however, the most intricate *chibdral* processions will include a number of additional lines. This is because, like in most ceremonies, it is best to have the most components possible according to the person's rank.

The most extensive form of *chibdral* is reserved for His Majesty the King, Head of States and others of this status. Events such as a coronation or royal marriage receptions receive the most extensive form of *chibdral*, as do state guests. The intermediate form of *chibdral* will be performed for those within the ranks of cabinet ministers and equivalent. The abbreviated form of *chibdral* is presented to district controllers, and anyone in lower ranks; common people also use this form of the ceremony. In short, the performance of *chibdral* varies from occasion to occasion, depending on the importance of the event and the rank of the honouree.

In the past, the *chibdral* procession would begin at the house of the person being honoured, and continued to the final destination. However, these days the honouree travels in a car to the venue entrance and the procession begins from there.

### **Components of *Chibdral***

Like most special occasions, such as weddings, religious rituals or high-profile promotions, the *chibdral* procession occurs on an auspicious day. This day is determined by consulting an astrologer. One person is selected to lead the procession based on their astrological details and who possesses a clean mind, body, soul, luck, intelligence and strength of life. All of these qualities must be present to maintain integrity of the ceremony.

This person carries a white scarf with the symbols of Nyimo Delek (auspicious day) and the Tashi Tagye (eight auspicious signs). Following him is a rider-less white stallion, its forehead decorated and on its back laid a white scarf also displaying the Nyimo Delek and Tashi Tagye. On the scarf are placed the three jewels. Stallions are believed to have powers to resist evil and offer long life, and its position at the head of the procession signifies good omens to come. In its earliest forms, there were white, red and mixed coloured horses used in the procession. However, in modern times such horses are rarely, if ever, used. Instead, a surrogate in the form of a white fabric or other white object is displayed in place of the actual animal.

Men dressed in red *ghos* beating drums and ringing bells walk behind the stallion, while two men in green *ghos* blow small horns. Next are a series of flag bearers: Chogdar (directional flag), Tsendar (a series in which each flag is associated with a particular deity), Rudar (coy flag), darneynga (five coloured flags) and Gyaldar (victory banner). Armoured marchers and Pa Chham

dancers will follow the flag bearers, and behind them walk high profile officers. Next come a group of people carrying various religious items like shrine covers, mandala (geometric meditation diagram), Zegyed (eight lucky articles), Gyalsid Naduen (the seven precious emblems), statues, stupas and incense. Also in the group are individuals bearing earthly objects, such as the Thrikheb (throne cover), Soelchu Jandum (water container), Chagsil Pangkhep (hand wash lap cover), Chitala (spit pot), Doma Bathra (Domapani container).

Following these individuals is the Kudrung (monk prefect), who claps his hands in order to alert the entourage of arriving chief guest the ground, signifying control over the area. Next is the chief guest, along with his bodyguards and attendants, if present. During the course of the procession, Pawo dancers line either side of the *chibdral* as it moves along. The dancers hold small drums in their hands and call attention to the chief guest and create a pleasing environment around him.

As the procession enters the ceremony venue, those persons carrying the Chogdar, Tsendar, Rudar and Darna Nga flags stand behind the official who is being promoted or honoured. To the right is a line of dancers and singers, office people and divisional heads. On the left side are the team of escorts and people carrying the official's belongings. The official who is promoted stands between the two lines and in front of the bearers, where he remains while until the conclusion of the *marchang* ceremony. *Marchang* is a ceremony following *chibdral*, and is an offering of alcohol to deities and teachers to secure blessings for the removal of obstacles, and for successful outcomes.

Now to detail the components and what each element signifies.

The first twenty-one participants are laypersons:

1. White, red and mixed coloured stallions for flourishing fortune.
2. Drum signifies its command over judicial affairs of the nation
3. Bell enhances musical sound created by drum.
4. Trumpet for inviting through melodious tone.
5. Directional flags for protecting from harm by humans and non-humans.
6. Banner of deity for abiding with one's own deities.
7. Ancient military banner for the abidance of dharma protectors.
8. Eleven different coloured flags for pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, destroying and constitute enlightened activities.
9. Police flag signifies the maintaining of law and order in the country.
10. Military flag signifies the subduing of country's enemies.
11. Royal Body Guard flag for guarding His Majesty's life from the external harm.
12. National flag signifying the greatness of a country.
13. Pawo dancers signify best of the ancient dances.
14. Military band signifying modernity.



15. A pair of drinking water containers for containing drinking water in the ancient times for the VIP
16. Traditional bag such as those used in the distant past.
17. Traditional dancers from Trongsa (Nubzhey of central Bhutan)
18. Traditional dancers from Paro (Wuchupaizhey of western Bhutan)
19. Traditional dancers from Thimphu (Wangzhey of western Bhutan)
20. Royal dancers signifying the perseverance of Bhutanese traditional dances and songs.
21. Dance of religious song signifies the root of Drukpa Kagyud tradition.
22. Heroic dancers called Pa Chham, as described in vision by the 15th century master Pema Lingpa, from an experience in Guru Rinpoche's Copper Mountain Paradise.

Thus, these lay performances celebrate the establishment and flourishing of the modern Bhutanese state, drawing on religious history and encompassing the dawn of the modern age. Including military elements encourages viewers to remain steadfast as unified. By including dances native to different parts of Bhutan, the diversity of Bhutan is celebrated. At the same time, by referencing the many sources of Bhutanese culture—religious, traditional and historical—these elements help to reinforce Bhutanese national identity.

The following are carried and displayed by the religious body:

1. Religious gong signifying monastic discipline.
2. Fan for bringing comfort to others.
3. Small bell for offering of invitation.
4. Offering articles signify the victory over discordant opponents.
5. Upper cover of alter signifies invitation with the seat.
6. Mandala signifies the offering of the religious universe.
7. Shrine objects of body, speech and mind to prolong life.
8. Eight auspicious signs bring about good luck.
9. Eight auspicious substances/articles blessed by Buddha that enhance physical health of all beings.
10. Seven precious substances representing seven royal treasures of a universal monarch.
11. A conch, the sound of which is thought to precipitate mindful religious governance.
12. Religious trumpet signifies the offering of melodious sounds.
13. Large trumpet signifies invitation.
14. Large drum is melodious offering.
15. Cymbal (thinner one) is an additional melodious offering.

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16. Sixteen goddesses known as dakinis signify invitation.
17. Perfuming pan/bowl to purify the surrounding environment.
18. Government officials also appear here, signify the highest representatives of the government and the unity of the governing and religious communities.

Just before the guest of honour are persons carrying a number of items for his protection and comfort:

1. A person carries a statue of the war god/protector in case of our Royal monarchs.
2. A person carrying seat cover.
3. A person bearing a traditional flask for containing water and tea.
4. A person with a 'Bathra', a traditional betel nut container. Betel nut is a mild stimulant often chewed within a leaf with lime paste.

These are followed by the final members of the procession:

1. The discipline master of monk body
2. Chamberlain signifying the government and internal management.
3. Chief Guest

4. The four *lopens*, or teachers, drawn from the monastic body, who protect the honouree from inner and secret obstacles.
5. A general and bodyguards who protect from outer obstacles.

### **Benefits of *chibdral***

*Chibdral* contributes to the vitality of those assembled. This welcoming process can be adapted to any population, enabling the people to bridge differences between genders, age, class, race and abilities as well. From its inception, *chibdral* was meant to unify and bond members of the community. Based on the chos srid system instituted by the Zhabdrung, the unity between governmental and religious authority was emphasized during his state building initiatives, and this theme remains an obvious component of the *chibdral* ceremony. By encouraging—and almost requiring—the ceremony to be performed so frequently, the Bhutanese state and its religion remains at the forefront of society, and outlines the ways in which the different peoples of the nation are bound together.

In traditional Bhutanese hierarchy, superiors are required to act with affection and compassion towards their subordinates, while lower levels are obliged to respect their superiors, ideally cultivating balance social harmony. Thus, these ceremonies serve as visual tool to remind each of their obligations to the system. It further enriches Bhutanese cultural values by strengthening the social bonds among one another.

Ultimately, making offerings through *chibdral* ceremonies are believed to accumulate Buddhist merit and reduce suffering for

oneself and all sentient beings, one of the main goals of the state religion.

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